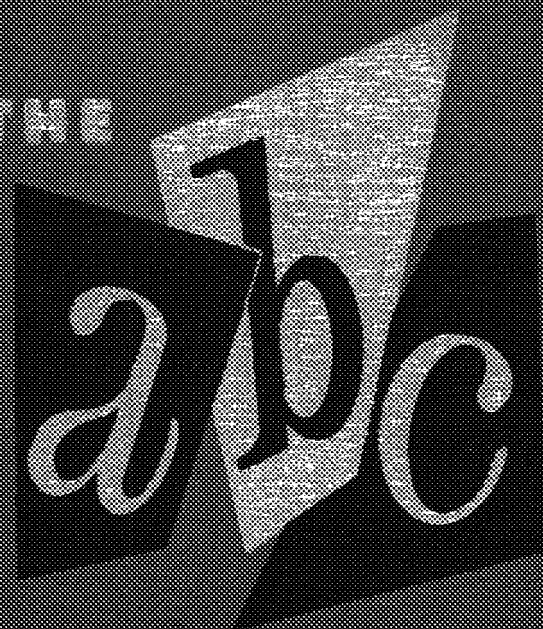


THE



OF
CLEAR
WRITING

CONVAIR
FORT WORTH

Approved For Release 2008/05/05 : CIA-RDP74-00005R000200110007-3



CONVAIR
FORT WORTH

Approved For Release 2008/05/05 : CIA-RDP74-00005R000200110007-3

abc

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You probably spend a great deal of time expressing yourself—or trying to express yourself—on paper. Why not do a better job of it by following a few down-to-earth principles—the ABC's of clear writing?

• • • • • **for easy reading**

thing they misunderstand, you have failed as a writer.

And what's worse, you have caused confusion and have wasted time and effort. Not only *your* time and effort, but the time and effort of everybody who tries to figure out what you had in mind.

This booklet assumes that you have a working knowledge of informal everyday English. That's enough. This booklet has little to say about grammar and its rules.

This booklet has lots to say about *getting your meaning across*, which is more important than grammar. And it discusses the ABC's of clear writing — the kind of writing that will help put your meaning across to others.

If you follow these principles, Convair will benefit. And *you'll* benefit the rest of your life. Maybe in heaven, too, for the Bible shows that Christ Himself believes in putting meaning across through short sentences and simple words.

There are at least four results of clear writing. Your reader will

- *read it faster*
- *understand it better*
- *remember it longer*
- *enjoy it more*

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the

a

b

c

of clear writing

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• here are the principles we're talking about

a

think..then write

b

let the reader in on it

c

write to express..not to impress

d

write like you talk

e

keep sentences short

f

use familiar words

g

prefer the simple to the complex

h

be concrete

i

put action in your verbs

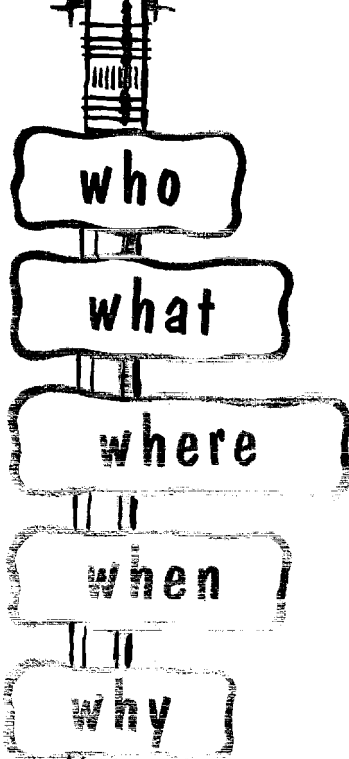
j

appeal to your reader's interest

k

revise and sharpen

think.....



Clear writing is like an iceberg: one-ninth you see, eight-ninths you don't. The part that gets on paper is small compared to the part that goes on in your head.

Clear *writing* is the result of clear *thinking*.

If the ideas are confused in your head . . . if the points you want to make are vague to you . . . they won't be any clearer just because you put them down on paper.

FORT WORTH 1, TEXAS

AUGUST C. ESENWEIN
VICE PRESIDENT

Memo to: All Employees
Subject: Clear Writing

This is a booklet about clear writing. It tells you how to write so that other people can understand you with ease.

Most of the writing you do at Convair-Fort Worth is to pass along information, instructions, suggestions, policy, and so on. You're not trying to win any Pulitzer prizes for literature. You're writing to express, not to impress.

Much of the writing at Convair-Fort Worth is needlessly complex. It's made up of long sentences full of five-dollar words and little meaning. Some of it would stump a Philadelphia lawyer.

We're going to put an end to this kind of writing. We must have more easy-to-read writing at Convair. From now on, it's going to be fashionable to write so that your readers can get your meaning quickly.

Why? Because writing that's hard to understand leads to confusion. This is true at Convair, and it's true the world over. For example, how can you carry out instructions if you don't understand them? The problem is as simple as that.

And the answer is just as simple. Keep your sentences short, use familiar words, and follow the other principles in this booklet. These principles show you how to write simply, clearly, and interestingly.


August C. Esenwein
Manager

w r i t i n g

There's no magic formula for good writing. In fact, getting ideas from your head into the other fellow's head by means of black marks on white paper is a downright difficult job.

It's a harder job than getting your message across by talking to him. When you're talking, you can see what kind of impression you're making. You can emphasize points by raising your voice or pounding the table. You can smile, gesture, and so on to help get your meaning across. And if there's still some doubt, your listener can ask questions.

But when you're writing, you generally don't have a second chance. For good or bad, the words are down on paper. And you're stuck with them, regardless of whether your reader gives them a meaning totally different from what you had in mind.

This booklet will help you get your *meaning* across in writing. And in your writing at Convair, *meaning* is all-important. If you write something that your readers don't understand, or some-

Our aim at Convair-Fort Worth is to write material that is

- *well organized*
- *easy to read*
- *clear to the average reader*

..... then write

To write clearly, you must do a lot of thinking *beforehand*. You must figure out just *what* you want to say. And *why* you're writing in the first place. And *who* your readers are.

Decide what's wheat and what's chaff — and throw out the chaff. Plan to stress the main idea so that your readers will be sure to get it.

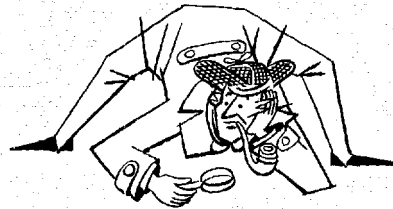
Organize the material in some logical way. According to time, maybe. Start with what happened first, what happened next, and so on. Or arrange the material according to importance, listing the most important point first, the next most important second, and so on. Or you may want to organize the material in straight 1-2-3 order. Any *logical* arrangement will do.

The pattern you can use most often is the who-what-where-when-why order of a news story. State your main idea briefly at the beginning. Then give the points and details supporting this idea.

Once you have organized the material, you can then concentrate on the *job* of saying what you have to say. You'll find that you can write it briefly and clearly.

Like many other good things in the world, clear writing doesn't just happen. You've got to plan it.

Let



Here's the kind of writing we've declared war on. Below is a single sentence from something Convair published about a company policy.

The president or any vice president acting jointly with the secretary or any assistant secretary of the corporation is authorized with full power of revocation and substitution, to empower and vest designated employees of this corporation with authority to execute in the name and in behalf of this corporation agreements, in forms previously approved by the general counsel, with those employees who are involved in intra- and inter-division transfers and with those persons to be employed who will incur re-imbursable travel and moving expenses in relocating at the place of employment, which agreements set forth the conditions of such transfers and reimbursements.

Quickly now, who did what to whom?

Get the reader in on it

Most of the writing we do at Convair-Fort Worth is to *inform*. So it's generally a good idea to tell the reader — at the beginning — what it's all about. Suspense is important in some forms of writing, but rarely if ever in ours. The "whodunit" writer aims to mystify; we aim to inform.

The beginning of a piece of writing is the most important part.

So start punching right off. Come to the point quickly. Get the reader into the midst of things. Start with something that matters, such as your main idea. Or tell the reader something that will make him sit up and take notice. Preferably something that is of interest to *him*.

You'll find that if you pick out your main idea and state it briefly at the beginning, you'll have little trouble staying on the beam for the remainder of the memo or letter or what-have-you.

And the reader will have less trouble following you if he has some idea where you're going.

Don't start off in a roundabout fashion. Don't bore your reader with a long-winded introduction. If you do, he's likely to quit reading before he gets to the main idea.

write



Look at these two samples of writing. See how a few words, identical in meaning, can give you a totally different picture of the man who wrote them.

First, consider this:

"I am at present engaged in the sale of corn on commission. It is not an avocation of a remunerative description."

Got the picture of the man who wrote that? Okay.

Now suppose the man had expressed the same thought in these words:

"I sell corn on commission. It doesn't pay."

You get a picture of quite a different person, don't you? The first man is windy and pompous. The second is forceful and direct.

They were different people, too. The first was Micawber, the famed blowhard in Dickens' David Copperfield. The second was a businessman who put Micawber's thought into clear writing.

• • • • to express—not to impress

Biggest fault of most writing at Convair-Fort Worth is that the writer is trying to *impress* someone. His secretary, maybe, or his department head, or the division manager.

So the writer makes sure that he uses a lot of polysyllables. And he writes long sentences and involved paragraphs. He's going to prove that he can handle the king's English as well as the next fellow. The result is sometimes full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.

Somewhere he got the wild idea that this kind of writing makes him appear intelligent.

But somewhere he lost the *real* idea: that he's writing to *inform* his readers . . . to get facts from his head into their heads.

When you're writing primarily to inform, you should use words generally familiar to your readers and you should keep your sentences reasonably short. Write to *express*, not to *impress*.

The person who can express complex ideas simply is likely to go farther in the world than the person who writes gobbledygook.

w r i t e

Many people tighten up when they begin writing or dictating. They become stiff and unnatural and impersonal.

They choose pretentious words that they would never use in talking — “subsequent to” instead of “after,” “utilization” instead of “use,” “optimum”

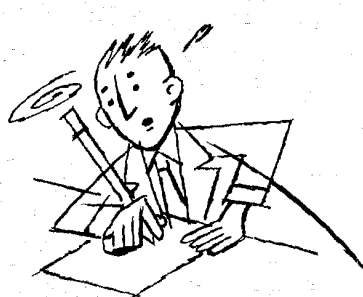


You talk like this.

If you need more stickers, ask us for them.

Here are the sample memos you wanted for the clear-writing clinic.

Designers now assume the public prefers one-piece windshields.



Why write like this?

Should the supply of stickers sent you prove to be insufficient to meet your requirements, application should be made to this office for an additional quantity.

In reference to communications requested as samples for the clear-writing clinic, the attached memoranda are herewith submitted.

Present designs of windshields are predicated on the assumption that one-piece windshields are preferred by the general public.

..... like you talk

instead of "best," and so on to sickening infinity.

They shun personal pronouns like the plague. Ditto for contractions (like "isn't" and "you'll"). They wouldn't think of writing a fragmentary sentence to give emphasis or variety.

And their written sentences are twice as long as their spoken sentences.

The result is not only dull reading — it's difficult reading.

They use plain words in talking, and they use personal pronouns, contractions, and fragmentary sentences. But they don't use these things when writing. Even when writing informal memos and letters.

That's a pity. A conversational tone is one of the best avenues to readable writing. It increases interest. It increases understanding, too, because it forces the writer to be more direct.

Don't lapse into a stuffy business jargon that has no relation to the way business people talk face-to-face.

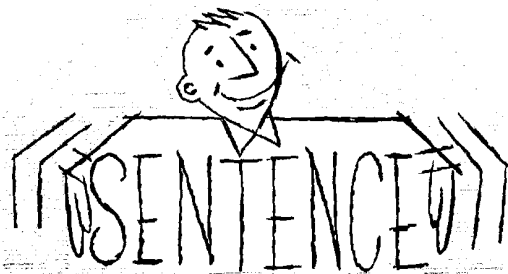
Try this. Next time you have to write something, get a mental picture of the reader. *Then talk to him on paper.*

keep

English sentences are getting shorter and shorter. In the seventeenth century, sentences averaged about 45 words. By the nineteenth century, the average had shrunk to about 30 words. Today, the average is *less than 20 words*.

That's the average for written material which reaches a large audience — newspapers, magazines, best-sellers. These are written in *the kind of sentences people like to read*. In fact, people pay hard-earned money for the opportunity. *Reader's Digest*, for instance, averages only 15 to 16 words per sentence. So does *Newsweek*.

Unfortunately, the business world — Convair in-



Whenever you can shorten a sentence, do. And one always can. The best sentence? The shortest.

— Gustave Flaubert

There are few things in life as beautiful as a simple sentence . . . or as rare.

Sentences short

cluded — has not yet whittled its sentence length down to size. It's still about a century behind the times.

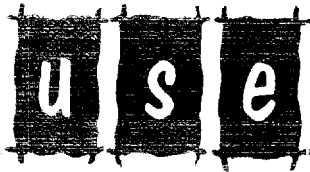
The logic of writing short sentences is obvious. The longer the sentence, the more words. The more words, the more relationships. The more relationships, the more effort for the reader. The more effort for the reader, the more chance he will misunderstand, and the sooner he will quit reading.

People don't like to read material made up of 40-word sentences, even if they get it for free. Reading tends to become hard when sentences average above 20 words.

So keep your sentences short. Sprinkle periods liberally over what you're writing.

Keep the *average* length of your sentences below 20 words. With 20-word sentences, you can write on nearly any subject in this world or the next.

Note that we're talking about *averages*. There's nothing wrong with a 40-word sentence, or even a 60-word sentence, *now and then*. You'll need a long sentence occasionally for variety. But balance these long sentences with some short ones of five or ten words, to keep the average length below 20 words.



These days you don't get much chance to show off your vocabulary treasures. Like your tuxedo, they have to stay at home most of the time.

That's hard, but it's fair. Particularly for the reader.

If you have a big vocabulary full of sesquipedalian polysyllables — that's fine. It'll help you read. It'll help you learn. It'll help you think. It'll even help you work crossword puzzles.

But use it sparingly in your writing.

Why? Because when you want to communicate with somebody, you have to use the words he has in *his* head.

If he doesn't understand some of the words you use, he's likely to miss your meaning.

Bear this simple truth in mind. Unless *he* understands, you have accomplished nothing.

Fortunately for all of us, the chance of striking awe by means of big words has about run out. The United States has passed the yokel stage

• • • • • familiar words

where it can be impressed by a flow of polysyllables.

When people are interested enough in the subject, they put on their hip boots and try to wade through the long sentences and highbrow words.

But the average person at Convair and elsewhere is only mildly interested in what he is *expected* to read. If he finds the first paragraph is made up of tortuous sentences and unfamiliar words, that's all she wrote, as far as he is concerned. He doesn't have the interest or the time to figure out what the writer was trying to put across.

You won't lose your reader if you give him more short sentences and fewer complex words.

There's no better way to a clear, crisp writing style than short sentences and short words.

So keep your mixture of polysyllables lean. Keep the percentage of hard words (three or more syllables) under ten percent.

If you mix in more than one three-syllable word in ten, you're taking chances. That's about the limit for easy reading.

p r e f e r

Most complexity in written material is the fault of the writer. It's not the fault of the reader. And certainly not the fault of the subject.

If you want to write so that you can be easily understood, *prefer* the simple to the complex. Prefer the simple word to the complicated word. Prefer the simple sentence to the complex sentence. Prefer the simple paragraph to the involved one.

The skeptic may say, "That's all right when you're dealing with simple subjects. But you don't mean for this principle to apply when you're writing about complicated subjects?"

Emphatically yes! That's when you need the principle more than ever. Here's why.

A reader has only a limited amount of mental power. If he has to use all this power in figuring out your words and their relationships, he has none left to grasp the complicated thoughts you're trying to express.

This point is not so philosophical as it may sound. The more you think about it, the more you'll agree with it.

• • • • • the simple to the complex

And once you agree with it, *you'll* prefer the simple words and sentences when you write.

This doesn't mean that you should use simple words and sentences and paragraphs all the time. The word *prefer* is a key one in this principle of clear writing.

A steady diet of simple words and sentences would get mighty monotonous to the reader. Vary the diet so that he won't get bored. Variety is the spice of reading as well as of life.

Use simple, short sentences frequently, *but not all the time*. Use familiar words when possible, but if a foot-and-a-half-long word is really necessary, *use it*. Keep most paragraphs short, but don't be afraid to *toss in a fairly long one if logic demands it*.

Don't think for a moment that the principles of clear writing put you in a strait jacket. You have all the freedom you'll ever need. You can give free rein to your individual writing style. And you should . . . for variety's sake.



The three laws of good writing are: (1) be concrete, (2) be concrete, and (3) be concrete.

Use lots of concrete, specific words that stand for things you and your reader can see, hear, taste, touch, and smell. If possible, call a spade a spade.

Concrete nouns are good bait for catching readers and holding them.

Shy away from abstract words which soar into the blue and stand for things you can't pin down. It's hard to say just what abstract words do mean. And they often mean different things to different people. Take "democracy" and "indoctrination," for example. You'd probably have a hard time finding three people who agree on the exact meaning of these two common words.

Abstract words make your writing dull and foggy. The more of them you use, the harder your writing is to understand.

Here's the difficulty. When you become familiar with an abstract word, you generally forget that it may bring only a fuzzy or misleading idea to the mind of your reader.

c r e t e

Consider these two sentences:

In industrial communities the chief motivation for the purchase of curtains is practicality.

In factory towns housewives buy curtains that wash well.

The first sentence is abstract, hard for the reader to understand. The second is concrete, easy to grasp.

Here's another example:

It is suggested that the voucher be rewritten with the explanation that official business was performed on December 10.

How vague can you get? *Who* suggests? *Who* should rewrite the voucher? *Who* performed official business?

Be concrete. Be specific. Write it like this:

We suggest that *you* rewrite the voucher, explaining that *Joe Blow* performed official business on December 10.

If you want to keep your writing clear and crisp and understandable, load it with concrete nouns and verbs.

put action

Write most of your sentences like this: subject . . . verb . . . object. The habit of trying first for this subject-verb-object combination should be as automatic as pushing the starter button before stepping on the gas.

Why? Because then you'll be using *active* verbs. And active verbs are the kind that give snap and punch to your writing.

You'll also be writing like you talk. Odds are that you use active verbs more in talking than in writing.

Active verbs are more natural, more direct, more forceful than passive verbs. Increase the percentage of active verbs, and watch your writing come to life.

Let's take a very simple example.

- (1) The boy hit the ball. (active)
- (2) The ball was hit by the boy. (passive)
- (3) The hitting of the ball was done by the boy. (still more passive)

The first version has the subject-verb-object combination. It has an active verb. This is how you would normally *speak* this thought.

The second version has a passive verb. The snap of action has almost gone.

• • • • • in your verbs

The third version is a completely backward arrangement. The action has now disappeared. The verb force has become the *subject* of the sentence.

Also, notice how much longer and indirect the second and third versions have become.

In good writing — writing that sells — about one word out of ten is a strong active verb.

One of the things you like about *Time* — if you like it — is the strong-flavored active verbs cropping up everywhere. They make for a lively style. The story marches along.

Much of the writing at Convair suffers from an overdose of passive verbs. As a result, it's lifeless and uninteresting.

Some people are so infected with "passivitis" that they use passive verbs to issue instructions, orders, and requests. This is contrary to the laws of logic and the laws of grammar. We'll not go into details, but normally you should use the second person ("you") and an *active verb* to issue an order or instruction.

For instance: "You must notify the personnel department of any change in your address." Or more simply: "Notify the personnel department of any change in your address."

Attention in your verbs

This is the *natural* way to speak and write. Why violate both logic and grammar to write the sentence with a passive verb?

Like this: "The personnel department will be notified by you of any change in your address." Or worse: "It is requested that the personnel department be notified of any change in your address."

Why do people write like this? The main reason is that passive verbs make it easy for them to pussyfoot, hedge, and generalize. They don't have to commit themselves. They can leave out the *doer* of the action.

For instance, instead of saying they believe something, or Convair suggests something, they write "it is believed," or "it is suggested," and so on.

Once in a great while you may have good reason for writing something that's not too clear. Then use the impersonal, passive way of writing. But when your purpose is clear communication, use lots of active verbs, and write direct and to the point.



Ever hear the story of the plumber who wrote to the Bureau of Standards that he had found hydrochloric acid good for cleaning out clogged drains?

He got the following answer: "The efficacy of hydrochloric acid is indisputable, but the corrosive residue is incompatible with metallic permanence."

So the plumber wrote back that he was glad the Bureau agreed with him.

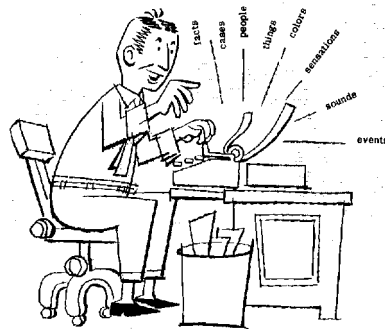
The Bureau tried again: "We cannot assume responsibility for the production of toxic residue with hydrochloric acid and suggest use of alternative procedure."

The plumber again expressed his appreciation to the Bureau for agreeing with him.

Finally, in desperation, the Bureau climbed down off its high horse and wrote:

"Don't use hydrochloric acid. It'll eat hell out of your pipes."

a p p e a l



It's this basic attitude, this yearning for concreteness, this lifelong itch to get down to facts, cases, people, things, colors, sensations, sounds, events, scenes, movement, dialogue, that makes a professional writer what he is. He can't understand other people who don't have that itch . . . When he hears and sees the millions of high-flown generalities that fill the world's air and cover the world's paper, he wants to talk back, to ask for practical illustrations, living examples, who-said-exactly-what-to-whom and how-does-this-affect-Mrs.-McNulty-in-Hackensack-New-Jersey . . .

The ordinary person never understands this. He thinks the secret of writing is something entirely different. He wants rules . . . he'll do the rest and supply the material, the ideas to be expressed. Unfortunately things don't work that way: to write well, you must think differently; you must have the itch for reality. . .

— Rudolf Flesch

• • • • • to your reader's interest

If writing interests a reader, it'll do a better job of informing him or influencing him. So be sure to touch the reader's interest.

You've already learned that he likes short sentences, concrete nouns, and active verbs. He also likes an informal conversational tone.

And he likes personal pronouns — "we," "I," "me," "you," "they." These pronouns increase his interest because they help make writing come alive. Personal pronouns show that the writer is talking about *people* — not just about things and facts and ideas.

But the problem of appealing to your reader's interest is broader than that. Stated simply, it's this: When you write something, *the reader — not you — is the all-important person.*

Don't forget the reader for a minute. Write *to* him and *for* him. Put yourself in his place. This memo you're going to write — what is there in it that's of interest to *him*? Pick out that something and get it into the memo early, perhaps in the opening sentence.

Unless your writing is at least mildly interesting to the reader, and unless he can understand it, he isn't going to read it.

revise

Nearly everything you read has been revised at least once. Most successful writers go over their material and sharpen it up after it's written.

So don't feel that revising your writing is something to be ashamed of. Everybody does it.



Here's a sentence from a Convair memo.

In view of the nature of the above problem, and the many and varied opinions of quality control, shop, and contracts, as well as the magnitude of some of the discrepancies that have existed in the past, it would be highly appreciated if a basic procedure in the form of a DSP could be initiated and released in the very near future outlining the policy that should be followed in making routine decisions wherein it is necessary to rework discrepancies found to exist by the ferry crew either prior to or after takeoff of an aircraft for delivery.

Note how the sentence shrinks when you cut out the "fat" words and come straight to the point. The reader will now get the meaning right away.

We need a DSP immediately telling us how to handle ferry crew squawks

• • • • • and sharpen

A good test for any kind of writing is to read it aloud. This will help you spot words and sentences that should be changed or thrown out.

When you write a first draft, you usually put down words and sentences that seem very clear at the time. Later, upon reading it closely, you'll no doubt find that you can make the meaning clearer by changing some words and deleting others. You'll probably discover that you can leave out phrases and sentences and even paragraphs. Possibly you can improve what's left by rearranging it.

Look for "fat" words that say nothing. Look for worn-out phrases. Look for unnecessary sentences. Look for paragraphs that don't carry their own weight. Cross out all of 'em. You'll be amazed at the crisp sound of what's left.

This is your last chance to give the reader an even break.

So chop that long paragraph in two — the reader likes white space. Underline important words and thoughts so the reader can't miss them. Or highlight them by putting them into separate paragraphs. If necessary, repeat your main point to make sure the reader gets it.

Then ask yourself: Will the reader be able to understand this without *working at it*? If not, then you're not through *working on it*.

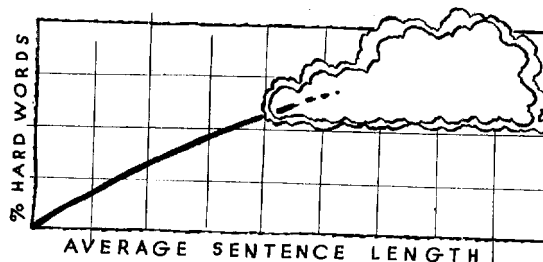
what's

Want a yardstick to measure how difficult your writing is to read?

That's where the Fog Index comes in.

But before explaining how to find your Fog Index, let's get one thing straight. *The way to write clearly is to apply the principles of clear writing. Then your Fog Index will take care of itself.*

There are several methods of measuring the readability of written material. All are based on sentence length and word length.



The short words are the best, and the old words the best of all.

— Winston Churchill

Churchill can handle the English language about as well as anybody. He knows there's some truth in the old saying: "Big men use little words; little men use big words."

.....your fog index?

The Fog Index method developed by Robert Gunning is the simplest. (*The Technique of Clear Writing*, McGraw-Hill, 1952) And it has one big advantage. It checks closely with school-grade levels of reading difficulty. For instance, the average person with ten years of schooling can read, *with ease*, material with a Fog Index of 10 or less. A college graduate can read material with a Fog Index of 16 or 17.

Here's how to find the Fog Index of written material. Take these three simple steps:

- (1) Figure out the average number of words per sentence. Use a sample at least 100 words long. Divide the total number of words by the number of sentences. *This gives you the average sentence length.*
- (2) Count the number of words of three syllables or more in the sample. Don't count (a) words that are capitalized; (b) combinations of short easy words — like “bookkeeper” and “butterfly”; (c) verbs that are made three syllables by “ed” or “es” — like “created” or “trespasses.” Divide the number of words of three syllables by the number of words in the sample. *This gives you the percentage of hard words.*
- (3) Add the two factors above and multiply the total by .4 *This gives you the Fog Index.*



The Fog Index is no cure-all and is not supposed to be. But it does give you a good idea of how difficult a piece of writing is to read and understand.

And you can be sure that if what you have written has a Fog Index of more than 12, it's above the easy-reading range. You're writing on the college level of complexity. You're placing under a handicap the ideas you're trying to express. And you're likely to be either ignored or misunderstood.

Earlier in this booklet, we urged you to use short sentences averaging *20 words or less*. We also urged you to use short words and to keep the mixture of polysyllables lean — *10 percent or less*. These two factors — 20-word sentences and 10 percent hard words — total 30. Multiply this by .4, and you get a Fog Index of 12. That's the danger line of reading difficulty.

The Bible, for the most part, has a Fog Index of 6 or 7. *Time* magazine measures about 10. Even the *Atlantic Monthly* has a Fog Index of only 12. This booklet has a Fog Index of less than 8.

We recently surveyed a cross section of our employees to find out how much schooling they had. We learned that the average employee here has about 11 years of schooling.

• • • • • to use the fog index

It stands to reason that if you are writing something for all employees, or for all employees in a department, you should write it with a Fog Index of 11 or less. Preferably less.

And bear this in mind, too. Just because a person has lots of schooling and can understand written matter with a Fog Index of 17-plus, this doesn't mean he likes to read such stuff. He doesn't like to stand on mental tiptoe and strain to get the meaning. He would much *rather* read stuff written with a Fog Index of 12, or 10, or 8. Wouldn't you?

We've graded some of the material written at Convair-Fort Worth during the past year. And much of it has failed miserably. Much of it has a Fog Index of 17 or higher, even though it was intended for hundreds — even thousands — of our employees.

There's no telling how many thousands of dollars this kind of writing has cost us in time, confusion, misunderstanding, and errors.

This booklet is just what the doctor ordered for you if your writing suffers from a Fog Index higher than 12.

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Learn the ABC's of clear writing. Practice what this booklet preaches. Your writing will become simple, clear, direct, and understandable.

You'll be writing for easy reading.

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